

**Statement of the Honorable Peter A. DeFazio
Ranking Member, House Committee on Natural Resources**

**Full Committee Oversight Hearing on
Reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act**

September 11, 2013

During the first twenty years of federal fisheries management under the Magnuson-Stevens Act we saw boom and bust cycles, dangerous derby fishing, and harvest rates that could sustain neither coastal economies nor ocean ecosystems in the long run. By the time we realized that there were too many people fishing for too few fish, we had allowed - and in some cases promoted - massive investments in boats, gear, and shoreside infrastructure that sometimes proved to be more than the supply of fish could support. Contraction, though painful, was inevitable.

We did learn from this mistake that the only path to expansion of a domestic fishery is through rebuilding of depleted stocks. NOAA projects that fully rebuilding all of our domestic fisheries could generate \$31 billion for our economy and provide employment for half a million Americans. Even at this early stage, revenue generated from stocks subject to rebuilding plans has increased more than fifty percent - \$565 million - since before rebuilding began. This is in large part due to the changes to the Magnuson-Stevens Act brought about by bipartisan reauthorizations in 1996 and 2006. The decisions to require an end to overfishing, establish science-based annual catch limits, set rebuilding deadlines, and inject accountability into the management process have put us on the brink of achieving the type of fisheries restoration success that many thought impossible.

Unfortunately, the benefits of rebuilding have accrued unevenly across fisheries. Some stocks like Pacific whiting and Atlantic sea scallop have bounced back and helped fuel local economies. Others like Atlantic cod have continued to limp along at levels far below what we once saw as an endless bounty. That some of these failures have happened in some of our most storied fishing communities, especially in New England, has made the situation even more frustrating.

In its recent report, the National Research Council explores the ways in which rebuilding under Magnuson has succeeded, and how it might be improved to secure the desired management outcomes at a lower short term cost to fishing communities. Their findings will surely spark a lively discussion here today, and I look forward to hearing more about the report from Dr. Sullivan. However, I would like to point out a few things that caught my eye.

First, the report points out that the current rebuilding approach has generally performed well in identifying overfished stocks, decreasing fishing mortality, and increasing stock biomass, leading to numerous rebuilding successes. The 1996 and 2006 Magnuson amendments required managers to make tough choices, rather than continuing to kick the can down the road, and many fisheries are now reaping the benefits. For those that have not rebounded, reexamining the rebuilding framework is necessary and appropriate, but we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Second, we lack the scientific understanding necessary to account for the effects of climate change, food web interactions, habitat degradation and other environmental factors on rebuilding fish stocks. The report states clearly that better science and more frequent assessments can lead to minor adjustments rather than

extreme swings in allowable harvest levels. We desperately need to develop the tools to apply an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

Third, the report notes that gradually reducing harvest before a stock requires rebuilding is the best way to keep fisheries healthy, but restoring stocks which are already severely depleted is more challenging and can have adverse economic impacts on fishing communities. The report suggests that additional flexibility in rebuilding plans could produce the desired results with less economic harm, but notes that additional accountability measures and precautionary buffers may be necessary in exchange for greater flexibility.

Fisheries management in the United States has made significant progress after the reforms to Magnuson in 1996 and 2006, especially in the area of rebuilding depleted stocks. However, there is not much solace in that for people who have not seen their fisheries rebound. As we look toward the next round of Magnuson reauthorization, we must ensure that fishing communities can stay viable while the stocks they depend upon rebuild, but also that we do not backtrack on the progress we've made.